

**Perspective-Taking in the Workplace: Can a Priming Manipulation Encourage Employees  
to Empathise with their Colleagues?**

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### **Abstract**

The current study attempted to expand perspective-taking literature in an organisational context by testing whether a priming mechanism could encourage employees to empathise with their colleagues. 140 full-time employees in New Zealand were randomly assigned to an imagine-other empathy prime condition, a control, or an objectively primed condition. They were then presented with an audio vignette depicting a young woman experiencing hardship in her personal life that was impacting her performance at work. Participants then responded to a questionnaire capturing perspective-taking, empathic concern, positive attributions, unconditionality, and level of regard. These scales were adapted to relate specifically to participants' colleagues, thus investigating if the priming manipulation affected their feelings towards their own workmates. Results showed no significant difference between groups for any of the dependent variables, suggesting either that a priming effect did not occur, or that the prime did not transfer to participants' empathy towards their own colleagues. Given the lack of research into empathy in an organisational context, these results provide a number of valuable insights as to how future research can continue to broaden this field.

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## **Introduction**

The development of meaningful interpersonal relationships is important for people's wellbeing and facilitates knowledge transfer between individuals (Batson, Early, and Salvarani, 1997). The study of how relationships are formed and maintained has been central to psychological research since the early 20th century (Davis, 1980). Recent advancements in industrial/organisational psychology research have led the field to transition away from a primarily utilitarian focus, to acknowledging the role that wellbeing and relationship building can have on desirable organisational outcomes (Abu Bakar et al, 2018). The philosophy underpinning this change is that utilitarian benchmarks of performance, turnover, and efficiency can be better achieved through implementing a psychosocial focus. In many cases, this involves referencing and adjusting paradigms that have been developed in the broader field of psychology and applying them to an organisational setting (Sessa, 1996). There are various areas of organisational psychology that remain underdeveloped, specifically in the understanding of how individuals build and maintain relationships with their colleagues (Glendon et al, 2007). Furthering this research is important because it provides a foundation of knowledge through which more comprehensive organisational initiatives can be developed.

One of the innate mechanisms that occurs during the process of relationship building is an exchange of empathy between individuals (Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997). The implicit ability to understand the perspective of another person and produce appropriate emotional reactions to relational cues is a significant determinant of a person's ability to foster meaningful relationships (Stotland, 1969). People tend to gravitate towards others with similar interests and life experiences, as this simplifies the empathic process (Barrett-Lennard, 2015). However, in an

organisational context, individuals are often unable to choose who they interact with, meaning that empathy may manifest differently in this context than in an external setting (Williams, Parker, & Turner, 2016). As will be discussed, the construct of empathy is relatively well developed in clinical and behavioural psychology, however there have been few studies focussing on empathy in a work environment. Thus, the current study has been designed to broaden existing measures of empathy to an organisational setting, and to explore the malleability of the construct by replicating and adjusting an existing method of perspective-taking priming (Batson, Early, and Salvarani, 1997).

### **Introduction to the Construct of Empathy**

There is a significant degree of contention amongst researchers as to the conceptualisation of empathy as a construct (Reniers et al, 2011). Its definition can be summarised as one's willingness and capability to take the perspective of those around them, thus understanding and accounting for others' emotions rather than solely their actions (Stotland, 1969). This explanation denotes four key facets that form a holistic construct. First is a willingness to empathise, reflecting this is a cognitive process that is at least partially deliberate. Secondly, the capability of taking the perspective of another person suggests that people possess varying levels of proficiency in empathy. Similarly, understanding and accounting for another person's emotions show that some degree of internal processing is required for the empathic process to be effective (Batson et al, 1988). This essentially requires the empathiser to extricate the target of their empathy from situational factors.

Davis (1980) highlights that empathy was initially termed "instinctive sympathy" by an unknown philosopher in the mid 1700's. The term "instinctive" was used to describe a subconscious emotional response to the experience of others, while "intellectualised sympathy"

was a measured emotive response with no attempt to vicariously experience the person's emotions. During the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, psychologists became more focussed on refining and conceptualising cognitive processes, meaning that empathy became increasingly operationalised as a construct separate to sympathy (Davis 1980).

Notably, Freud's description of the interaction between the ego and superego both parallels and builds upon the previous idea of instinctive and intellectualised sympathy (Frank, 1999). In his psychoanalytic theory, Freud suggests that children begin to develop the superego as they learn and adapt to social norms. This cognitive framework encourages people to behave conscientiously and respect the feelings of others (Frank, 1999). Similarly, instinctive sympathy was theorised to develop early in childhood; as parents reward behaviours that denote empathetic understanding, a child begins to form an instinctive and involuntary emotional response to the experience of others (Davis, 1980). Intellectualised sympathy manifests as the ego moderating this emotional response. As Freud theorised, the ego acts as a filter; its interaction with the superego is to prevent manipulation and social harm that could occur from blindly following rules and caring for the needs of others with no selfish motivation. Intellectualised sympathy, like the ego, acts as a cognitive filter that is applied to determine the motives of others (Davis, 1980). Similarly, the ability to understand and form a normative response to the emotions of others was an integral aspect of Piaget's (1932) theory of cognitive development. A child's transition between stages is largely determined by their increasing ability to empathise with others and regulate their own emotional response to the feelings and actions of those around them. Studies such as these led to an increasing understanding of empathy and enabled future research to further refine its definition.



The centrality of empathy in these renowned psychological theories highlights its importance as a foundational cognitive construct. However, as with many cognitive-emotive processes, early research began to uncover the complexity underpinning the construct (Stotland, 1969). Of foremost concern to academics seeking to develop their understanding of empathy was the development of a coherent, robust, and scientific definition (Batson, Early, and Salvarani, 1997). This would enable scholars to conduct divergent studies with the assurance that they were all measuring the same construct.

Most notably, discrepancy occurred in the idea as to whether empathy was a personality trait, an emotive state, or a mixture of the two (Reniers et al, 2011). The difference being that a trait should be stable across time and not susceptible to short-term fluctuations, while a state can be directly or subconsciously induced, resulting in short-term variation. Empathy remains as a sub-category to the construct of agreeableness in five-factor models of personality, suggesting its predominant understanding is that of a trait (Graziano et al, 2007). However, scholars who have extensively studied empathy as a construct agree that this is too simple of a categorisation (Reniers et al, 2011). Studies on empathy have produced conflicting results in this regard, with some showing no significant fluctuations in empathy across time or under experimental manipulation (Davis, 1980), and others suggesting that empathy is susceptible to influence through priming and other means (Batson et al, 1989).

### **Distinguishing Sub-Factors of Empathy**

By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, researchers found sufficient evidence to suggest that the construct of empathy should be split in to multiple factors (Davis 1980). Stotland (1969) pioneered a dichotomous differentiation between cognitive and affective empathy, denoting that two related but ultimately unique processes underpin the construct. This could explain the

confounding evidence as to whether empathy was a trait or state; different cerebral processes occur in tandem to form a coherent empathetic response (Batson, 2009). Interestingly, defining empathy as both a cognitive and affective experience mirrors the initial conceptualisation of instinctual and intellectualised sympathy (Davis, 1980).

Davis (1980) provided empirical evidence for Stotland's (1969) theory that empathy is construed as two predominant factors: cognitive and affective. He did this by developing a scale of over one hundred items related to empathy and distributed this survey to thousands of individuals over an extended period. Gradually, he refined the scale through factor analyses and found two distinct constructs. These factors can be further subdivided in order to display a more comprehensive profile of an individual's level of empathy. For example, Davis (1980) then developed a four-factor 27 item scale of empathy measuring empathic fantasy, perspective-taking, empathic concern, and personal distress. This scale has been adapted by various researchers, such as Barrett-Lennard's (2015) Relationship Inventory, capturing affective empathy, level of regard, unconditionally, and congruence. Affective empathy and empathic concern both refer to feelings of tenderness and concern towards others. These feelings generally arise when the empathiser recognises that someone is experiencing emotional strife, meaning that the preliminary step of cognisance towards others' emotional state dictates when people will feel empathic concern (Batson, 2009).

The similar concept of sympathy differs from empathy as it involves feelings of sorrow for someone expressing negative emotions, however the sympathetic individual does not attempt to feel the same emotional state. This deeper understanding requires the prerequisite step of perspective-taking in order to facilitate feelings of empathy (Batson, 2009).

**Perspective-Taking: Imagine Self vs. Imagine Other**

Cognitive empathy, termed Perspective-taking, is the perceptive process that precedes affective empathetic emotions (Parker & Axtell, 2001). This requires the empathiser to either imagine how they would feel in the target's position (imagine-self), or to imagine how the other person is feeling (imagine-other) (Todd & Burgmer, 2013). These two types of perspective-taking have been compared and contrasted in multiple studies, with their effects largely overlapping (Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997). Both types induce higher levels of empathic concern and altruistic motivation, however, imagine-self perspective-taking has been shown to result in more feelings of personal distress (Batson, 2009). This is because imagining oneself in another's position can instigate a stress response that leads to an egoistic motivation to alleviate distress. Thus, imagine-self perspective-taking leads to both an altruistic and egoistic motivation; creating ambiguity in how individuals will respond to these feelings (Batson et al, 2003).

Imagine-self perspective taking is easier to encourage because people are more attuned to their own feelings than those around them. However, imagine-other perspective-taking can lead to a more accurate evaluation of how the target is actually feeling as this takes into account other peoples' personal differences and how these might shape their emotional reaction to a given scenario (Zaki & Cikara, 2015). In reference to an organisational context, individuals tend to default to imagine-self perspective-taking when attempting to empathise with people they do not have strong relational bonds with (Todd & Galinsky, 2014). This means that empathic exchanges could be hindered in organisations where social connections between colleagues are not sufficiently facilitated. Sessa (1996) suggests that regularly mentioning the importance of empathy encourages perspective-taking within teams and enables meaningful relationships to

develop. In turn, this increases the likelihood that team members will engage in altruistic acts, manifesting as helping and citizenship behaviours in an organisational context.

### **The Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis**

Understanding how to encourage altruistic behaviour is the focus of many studies within the broad domain of psychology, and specifically within organisational psychology literature (Klimecki et al, 2016). Defined as a selfless concern for the wellbeing of others, many researchers debate whether truly altruistic behaviour exists at all (Batson et al, 1989).

Behavioural economics theorists use the concept of “utility” to determine whether an individual will engage in a given behaviour. Utility is a subjective evaluation of the intrinsic value of a given outcome (Witt, 2016). Under simple conditions, this is predominately determined based on an extrinsic variable, money. For example, a customer will purchase a can of soda for \$1 only if they calculate the intrinsic reward for consuming that item as greater than or equal to \$1. Where this overlaps with psychological research into altruism is through the manner in which different individuals evaluate the benefit of helping other people (Smith, Keating, & Stotland, 1989). Why will one person stop to help an elderly lady cross a street while many others will simply walk past? Behavioural economics suggests that the person who does help values the intrinsic reward of acting altruistically as at least equal to the cost of engaging in altruistic behaviours (Witt, 2016). Batson, Early, and Salvarani (1997) propose that the feeling of empathy contributes significantly to this cost-benefit analysis. Engaging in perspective-taking and experiencing affective concern for a person in need creates an incentive for people to mitigate their own negative emotions by relieving others of theirs.

In a work setting, altruism correlates with citizenship and helping behaviours (Nelissen et al, 2017). Citizenship behaviours are extra-role actions that provide benefit to the organisation

and are not financially rewarded, while helping behaviours are acts of information sharing or assistance that are not outlined as necessary for job achievement (Abu Bakar et al, 2018).

Workers who score higher on general perspective-taking have been shown to also engage in more citizenship and helping behaviours, suggesting that companies could benefit from an increased understanding of how to measure and increase empathy (Nelissen et al, 2017). As explained by the empathy-altruism hypothesis, highly empathic employees draw intrinsic reward from helping their colleagues, essentially negating the need to financially incentivise these behaviours. Sessa (1996) suggests that this is partially a result in a shift in cognition around the agency of colleagues in their performance. Workers are more likely to attribute success to the actions of their colleagues and are also more likely to account for situational factors when addressing failures.

### **Attributional Thinking**

Perspective-taking has also been shown to cause shifts in attributional thinking (Regan & Totten, 1975). Attributional thought refers to people's judgements of whether a certain outcome is related to dispositional or non-dispositional features of a target individual or group. Concurrent with Jones and Nisbett's (1971) theory of actor-observer bias, people tend to take more account of situational factors when analysing their own behaviours, while they fail to account for these same factors when explaining the behaviour of others. In practice, this means that individuals are more likely to excuse their own failings on account of inhibitory external factors, however they will place more blame directly on others for the same failure (Berstein, Stephan & Davis, 1979). Perspective-taking mitigates this effect as thinking from the perspective of another person requires that situational factors are considered to form an accurate perspective.

Increased perspective-taking also affects both implicit and explicit evaluations of sub-groups (Todd & Burgmer, 2013). Perspective-taking leads people to feel more positively toward the individual they empathise with, but also those that share similarities with the target, such as race and political ideals. This is explained by Batson and colleagues (1997) as a shift in evaluations of in-and-out group dynamics; where the process of empathising with people who had previously been viewed as having very little in common leads individuals to challenge their pre-existing ideas of what characterises those in a different social group. As previously mentioned, a barrier to engaging in imagine-other perspective-taking is generally the perception of lacking similarities between the empathiser and target. Through a focussed exercise of perspective-taking with one person, individuals challenge their concepts of group dynamics, and find they can more easily relate to the broader social groups that person belongs to (Todd & Galinsky, 2014).

### **Priming Perspective-Taking**

Psychological priming refers to an experimental technique of altering participants' mental state by exposing them to certain information/stimuli that causes them to subconsciously process information differently (Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997). Todd and Burgmer (2013) found that not only did people primed to perspective-take show more explicit positive attributions towards out-groups than those who did not receive a prime, this also translated to less negative bias captured in Greenwald, McGhee and Schwartz' (1998) Implicit Association Test. In another study, Todd and colleagues (2011) primed participants to perspective-take with an individual and measured approach-avoidance behaviour towards other people who occupied the same racial or social group, finding faster approach and slower avoidance in primed participants compared to a control group.

The positive effects of perspective-taking priming have been shown to remain for up to four months (Clore & Jeffery, 1972). However, more recent studies have conducted follow-up tests between one and seven days after the perspective-taking priming has occurred (Todd and Burgmer, 2013). Therefore, the practical implications of successfully priming empathy are relatively unclear. Researchers have continued to develop various methods of priming participants to be more or less willing to perspective-take with target subjects. Todd and Galinsky's (2014) review of priming research found that a single written sentence prior to observing a video or audio tape in which an individual seems to be in emotional strife was sufficient to prime participants to perspective-take with the target. These findings suggest that priming in an organisational context should be plausible. Exploring perspective-taking in this manner could suggest that organisations can benefit from incorporating periodic perspective-taking interventions amongst employees, especially if there is a high level of ethnic or socioeconomic diversity creating multiple in-groups. Interventions could incorporate simple methods of priming in order to encourage employees to consistently empathise with one another.

### **Organisational Research on Empathy**

While the majority of perspective-taking priming research has been conducted outside the realm of organisational/industrial literature, there has been research into the antecedents and outcomes of employee perspective-taking (Williams, Parker, & Turner, 2007). The effects of perspective-taking in an organisational setting are similar to those found in broader psychology research, with the primary outcomes being higher levels of altruism and positive attributions. However, researchers have also examined the flow-on effects of these outcomes in terms of tangible benefits to team cohesion and performance (Parker & Axtell, 2001). Sessa (1996) found

that teams operating with a high level of empathy exhibited significantly more citizenship behaviours than those with low and moderate levels. Williams, Parker, and Turner (2016) also found increased citizenship behaviours, instead labelling this as contextual performance. This in turn led to improved team cohesiveness, performance, and reduced turnover. Nelissen and colleagues (2017) provided further evidence for these relationships, and also found that high levels of intra-team perspective-taking promoted an inclusive climate that reduced the prevalence of in-an-out groups within workplaces.

Chong and colleagues (2020) found that empathy with colleagues and customers moderates the relationship between work engagement and job performance. This was explained as empathy providing a framework through which employees can channel their proactive drive while remaining sympathetic to the needs of those around them. In other words, considering the needs of the group ahead of their own desires.

Interestingly, Kamas and Preston (2020) found that workers with high levels of empathy tend to earn significantly less income than those with low empathy. This may seem contradictory to the finding that high empathy results in greater performance, particularly in management roles where interpersonal relationships are very important. In reality, there is evidence suggesting that empathetic individuals are more likely to enter into Public Sector employment, where there is less financial compensation. This supports the empathy-altruism hypothesis, as it appears that more empathetic individuals gain more utility from engaging in altruistic jobs, meaning they require less monetary reward than people lower in empathy.

With the benefits of workplace perspective-taking being relatively well catalogued, there is room for current research to investigate whether empathetic priming is effective in a workplace context. While many studies have been performed using university students as



participants, little research has attempted to expand these studies into an organisational setting (Batson et al, 1988) (Todd & Galinsky, 2014). If employees could be primed to perspective-take with their colleagues, this could lead to the aforementioned positive outcomes. Practical implementations of this research would be to provide evidence that workplaces could induce a priming effect by encouraging employees to empathise with one another through brief messages in staff meetings or written communiques.

### **Criticisms of Priming Research**

Recent studies have called into question the reliability and validity of priming studies based on two arguments; replicability and a misunderstanding of what priming actually is (Doyen et al, 2012). Psychological priming became increasingly prevalent during the 1990's because it was seen as a novel method of investigating behaviour in an experimental setting (Higgins & Eitam, 2014). As studies such as Batson and colleagues' (1988) produced significant results with seemingly minimal priming manipulation required, the field of research was quickly broadened to study plethora of behavioural mechanisms (Todd & Galinsky, 2014). However, modern replication of priming research has proved to be unreliable (Molden, 2014). Doyen and colleagues (2012) suggest that issues in replicability occur as a result of the methodology of original priming studies. Experimental bias was able to occur because researchers expected a behavioural change as a result of priming, so sought information to confirm this belief. Similarly, participants themselves may have been aware that they were expected to alter their behaviour in a certain way, thus conforming to the expected change in acquiescence rather than a shift in cognition (Molden, 2014). Critics of priming research tend to agree that the process of psychological priming does exist, however the overuse of priming methodology during the 1990's distorted the true definition (Higgins & Eitam, 2014). The priming procedure that will be

utilised in the current study was first developed by Batson and colleagues (1988), and was successfully replicated by Batson, Early, and Salvarani (1997). Modern studies such as that by Todd and Burgmer (2013) have also used a method similar to this in their own perspective-taking priming research. Thus, there is evidence for the replicability of perspective-taking priming in multiple studies. The current study intends to expand this methodology to a workplace setting and broaden the literature.

### **The Current Study**

The current study intends to expand perspective-taking literature in an organisational context by testing whether a priming mechanism can encourage employees to empathise with their colleagues. This will be achieved by modifying a research design first created by Batson and colleagues (1988) and expanded upon by Batson, Early, and Salvarani (1997). Following Davis' (1980) development of the four-factor empathy scale, Batson and colleagues (1988) sought to further explore perspective-taking as a unique construct. Specifically, their research focussed on operationalising and differentiating imagine-self and imagine-other perspective-taking. They conducted a series of five experiments, each attempting to prime perspective-taking through different means. A commonality between these experiments was in their method of priming participants. Each experiment used a between-subjects design with random assignment to an imagine-self, imagine-other, or objectively primed condition. The priming information was delivered in either a written or audio format, and always consisted of only a single sentence. For imagine-self perspective-taking participants were told to imagine how they would feel if they were in the position of a specific individual in need. Imagine-other conditions were requested to imagine how an individual in need would be feeling, rather than how they would feel in that position. Finally, objectively primed participants were encouraged to remain as objective as

possible by actively suppressing the desire to feel empathy for a person in need. Batson and colleagues (1997) included the objective prime as a control condition. However, it is possible that telling participants to think objectively altered their cognition, thus affecting their response to the questionnaires more than was expected.

The current study uses a methodology similar to an experiment first conducted in 1988 that was then modified and reused by Batson, Early, and Salvarani (1997). This specific experiment randomly assigned individuals to an imagine-self, imagine-other, or objective group. Priming information was delivered in a written format, then participants listened to a fabricated audio recording of a young woman experiencing significant emotional strife. Participants in each condition were not made aware that there were other conditions and were all given the same target to perspective-take with. After listening to the recording, participants responded to a survey listing emotions relating to Davis' (1980) four-factor measure of empathy. They recorded the extent to which they were currently experiencing each emotion. Results showed that both imagine-self and imagine-other perspective-taking resulted in higher levels of perspective-taking and empathic concern than the objective group, and that imagine-self perspective-taking caused more feelings of personal distress than both other conditions (Batson et al, 1988) (Batson, Early, and Salvarani, 1997).

The current study intends to expand this to a workplace setting by recording an audio vignette within an organisational context that depicts a woman experiencing personal distress at work as a result of the illness of her romantic partner. The purpose of this research is to ascertain whether a generalised perspective-taking prime will cause full-time workers to empathise more with their colleagues. This would suggest that organisations could incorporate subtle methods of priming perspective-taking to promote higher levels of empathy and positive

attributions. The current study will include an imagine-other empathy and objective prime, as well as a control condition with minimal instructions given. The purpose of including a control condition separate to the objective prime is to distinguish whether providing no instructions results in similar outcomes to the objective prime used by Batson, Early, and Salvarani (1997).

Items included in this study will be Davis' (1980) empathic concern scale, and an altered version of his perspective-taking scale, targeted specifically towards colleagues. To investigate the previously outlined link between perspective-taking and positive attributions, Parker and Axtell's (2001) items capturing workplace attributional thought will also be included. As this measure has not been validated, Barrett-Lennard's (2015) unconditionality scale is also included due to an appraisal of similarity based on face-validity. Finally, Barrett-Lennard's (2015) level of regard scale will also be adapted for exploratory purposes, determining whether a perspective-taking prime will influence the regard that participants have for their colleagues.

### **Hypotheses**

H1: The imagine-other empathy primed group will score significantly higher on the perspective-taking scale than the control, who will in turn score higher than the objective prime group.

H2: The imagine-other empathy primed group will score significantly higher on the empathic concern scale than the control, who will in turn score higher than the objective prime condition.

H3: The imagine-other empathy primed group will score significantly higher on the positive attributions scale than the control, who will in turn score higher than the objective prime group.

H4: The imagine-other empathy primed group will score significantly higher on the unconditionality scale than the control, who will in turn score higher than the objective prime group.

### ***Research Questions***

- 1: Will level of regard vary between conditions?
- 2: Will there be a significant difference in perspective-taking and empathic concern based on gender?
- 3: Will there be a significant difference in perspective-taking and empathic concern based on age?
- 4: Will participants who work in the Public Sector score higher on perspective-taking and empathic concern than those working in the Private Sector?

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The current study included 140 participants in full-time employment in New Zealand. 55 participants were originally recruited through convenience sampling, with 15 being removed due to incomplete data. Convenience sampling was conducted by contacting individuals and building a sample pool by requesting assistance from colleagues and associates. 100 participants were recruited through an Australian-based market research company (Lucid), who screened for New Zealand full-time employees over the age of 18. The combined sample included 64 males, 75 females, and 1 non-binary (54% female). The mean age of participants was 40, with the youngest individual being 20, and the oldest 74.

## **Design and Procedure**

The current study used a between-persons design with three groups. A survey was created on Qualtrics, all participants completed the study on their personal devices over the internet. The participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions when they opened the survey. Participants were not notified that there were multiple groups receiving different instructions prior to listening to an interview tape. Concurrent with Batson, Early, and Salvarani's (1997) suggestions, keeping participants unaware of there being multiple conditions aimed to minimise the possibility of people detecting that they were being primed. The only variation was in the initial instructions that participants listened to before listening to the audio vignette. These initial instructions included the priming information that was intended to influence how each group processed information in the following stage of the procedure. Group one was the control condition, who did not receive a priming effect. Group two was primed towards imagine-other perspective-taking, and group three was objectively primed. The perspective-taking and objective groups were primed using a method similar to Batson, Early, and Salvarani's (1997) method for imagine-other priming and the control group received minimal instruction.

### **Priming Procedure**

All groups listened to a recorded message prior to listening to an identical recorded interview tape.

#### ***Group One: Control***

Message: "You are about to listen to an audio recording taken from an interview with a young woman. This person was asked to describe how the past few weeks of work have been for her."

***Group Two: Positive Prime***

Message: “You are about to listen to an audio recording taken from an interview with a young woman. This person was asked to describe how the past few weeks of work have been for her. While listening to this recording, do your best to imagine how the person being interviewed must be feeling about what has happened and how their life is being affected.”

***Group Three: Objective***

Message: “You are about to listen to an audio recording taken from an interview with a young woman. This person was asked to describe how the past few weeks of work have been for her. While listening to this recording, do your best to remain as objective as possible about what has happened to the person being interviewed and how their life is being affected.”

**Audio Vignette: Adaptation of “The Katie Banks Scenario”**

The Katie Banks Scenario was created by Batson and colleagues (1988) to provide a target for individuals to perspective-take with in some experiments. The original scenario is a fabricated recording that was played to participants with a male interviewer questioning a female interviewee, Katie Banks, about her experience at a U.S University. Katie explains that she is undergoing extreme hardship due to her parents and sister being killed in an automobile accident, leaving her to care for her younger brother whilst attempting to complete her studies. This recording is meant to evoke an empathetic response from participants, however the strength of this response varies depending on the willingness and capability of individuals to perspective-take with Katie. The Katie Banks Scenario was used by Batson and his colleagues across a plethora of studies (Batson et al, 1988. Batson et al, 1989. Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997) and was also adapted by other researchers investigating perspective-taking (Todd & Burgmer, 2013). However, it is important to note that all of these studies involved experiments with participants

onsite, who could withdraw from participation at any time and who were debriefed in person immediately following the experiments. The traumatic nature of Katie's situation was deliberately exaggerated to evoke a strong empathetic response. However, the current study was conducted over the internet, where participants had no personal interaction with the experimenter. Also, the current study aimed to present participants with a situation that could realistically occur in their workplace (unknown to colleagues), and the death of a colleague's family members would result in them having time off. Therefore, a recording sharing similarities with the Katie Banks Scenario was created, with less drastic circumstances.

An interview script was written from the perspective of an employee at an unnamed firm (see Appendix A). This individual depicted a scenario where they were unable to fulfil their obligations to their boss and colleagues, thus increasing the workload of those around them. However, they explained that the illness of their romantic partner had both disrupted their work schedule and prevented them from focussing when they were at work due to a heightened level of stress and fatigue. The various priming conditions were designed to manipulate how participants process the information given in this recording before responding to a questionnaire.

## **Measures**

The dependent variables were measured through an online survey (see Appendix B for all survey items). All participants were administered the same questions. Davis' (1980) empathic concern scale was included in its original state. Davis' (1980) perspective-taking scale, Parker and Axtell's (2011) positive attributions scale, and Barrett-Lennard's (2015) level of regard and unconditionality scales were all adapted for the purposes of the current study. The original surveys measure these variables in a general sense; however they were modified for the current



study to specifically inquire about feelings towards colleagues. A total of 28 items were included in the questionnaire.

A total of 6 demographic variables were included before the participants heard the audio vignette: age, gender, organisational level, years in current role, industry, and sector (public or private). Age and gender were included for the purposes of convergent validity. Because the current study used primarily adapted scales, it was deemed necessary to include these variables for comparative purposes with other empathy studies. Wieck and Kunzmann (2015) suggest that perspective-taking tends to decrease with age, while empathic concern increases. Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) found that on average, women display more empathic concern than men. Organisational level, years in role, industry, and sector were included for exploratory purposes. Finally, an item was included to ascertain how believable participants found the audio recording, as low believability may compromise their data.

### **Debriefing**

After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed through a page of information (see Appendix C). This explained that the interview was staged, and the true purpose of the study was to measure the effectiveness of workplace perspective-taking priming. Participants were ensured that their data would be kept confidential, however they had the opportunity to withdraw from participation at this point.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analysed using the SPSS statistical software. Correlations were calculated between all variables measured in the current study. This included the index variables as well as the demographic measures captured before the audio vignette delivered. An ANOVA was conducted for each of the dependent variables. This calculated the between-group difference for

each index variable based on the condition that participants were assigned to. Observed Power and Partial Eta Square values were also calculated.

Index variables were created for perspective-taking, positive attributions, empathic concern, level of regard, and unconditionality by reverse-scoring the appropriate items and calculating each participant's mean score across the items for each of these variables. Exploratory factor analyses were then conducted for each of the index variables individually. Factor loadings were investigated to ascertain whether each item loaded on the same factor. The reverse-scored items for perspective-taking, empathic concern, and level of regard seemed to load on different factors to the non-reversed items, displayed by there being a secondary factor with an eigenvalue slightly above 1 in each of these cases.

Consequently, internal reliability analyses were performed for all index variables to provide further information on the content validity/reliability of the items. Perspective-taking ( $\alpha=.71$ ), empathic concern ( $\alpha=.69$ ), and level of regard ( $\alpha=.72$ ) all generated internal reliability coefficients above or very close to the 0.7 recommended cut-off, so the reverse-scored items were retained in an attempt to diverge as little as possible from the original validated scales. Positive attributions ( $\alpha=.67$ ) also produced a moderate-high internal reliability. However, the unconditionality ( $\alpha=.16$ ) scale yielded low internal reliability. The removal of any individual item would not have significantly improved this value.

A control variable was then created based on the believability item that was measured in the questionnaire. This item asked respondents how believable they found the audio vignette and was measured before it was revealed that the audio recording was fabricated. It was thought that participants who gave a low believability score were unlikely to have been influenced by the priming procedure and would not have responded in the desired manner to the questionnaire. A

total of 12 respondents gave a believability score of 1 (out of a possible 4) and were filtered out, leaving 128 participants. The factor and reliability analyses were then repeated to ensure this had not jeopardised the reliability of the study.

## Results

As shown in Table 1, significant positive correlations were found between all of the index variables with the exception of unconditionality and empathic concern. Gender was the only demographic variable to correlate significantly with an index variable, in this case empathic concern ( $r = .25^{**}$ ). The positive direction of the correlation shows that women tended to score higher on this scale. With regard to research question 2, which asked whether there would be significant difference in perspective-taking and empathic concern based on gender, the results show that women scored higher on empathic concern than men, while there was no difference in perspective-taking. Gender also had a weak negative correlation with years in role ( $r = -.22^{*}$ ), representing that men in this study tended to be more tenured in their role than women.

Similarly, a negative correlation between gender and sector shows that men were more likely to work in the private sector ( $r = -.20^{*}$ ). There was a moderate positive correlation between Age and Years in Role ( $r = .56^{**}$ ). There was no difference on perspective-taking and empathic concern for participants in the Public vs. Private sector. Research question 3 queried whether there would be a significant difference in perspective-taking and empathic concern based on age. Table 1 shows that there was no significant difference in this regard.

**Table 1***Correlation Coefficients (N=128)*

| Variable              | 1     | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5    | 6     | 7     | 8   | 9 |
|-----------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|-------|-------|-----|---|
| Positive Attributions | 1     |       |       |       |      |       |       |     |   |
| Level of Regard       | .36** | 1     |       |       |      |       |       |     |   |
| Empathic Concern      | .30** | .42** | 1     |       |      |       |       |     |   |
| Perspective-Taking    | .42** | .41** | .39** | 1     |      |       |       |     |   |
| Unconditionality      | .37** | .31** | .16   | .34** | 1    |       |       |     |   |
| Age                   | -.06  | .08   | .09   | -.05  | .01  | 1     |       |     |   |
| Gender                | -.07  | .08   | .25** | -.04  | -.06 | -.22* | 1     |     |   |
| Years in Role         | .01   | -.08  | .01   | .11   | .13  | .56** | -.22* | 1   |   |
| Sector                | -.02  | .03   | .12   | .02   | -.06 | .16   | -.20* | .02 | 1 |

\*P &lt; .10 \*\*P &lt; .05

As shown in Table 2, there were no significant differences between the group means for any of the index variables. There was insufficient evidence to support hypotheses 1,2,3, and 4, which predicted that the imagine-other empathy group would score higher than the control, who would score higher than the objective condition for perspective-taking, empathic concern, positive attributions, and unconditionality respectively.

Research question 1 asked whether level of regard would vary between conditions. Table 2 shows that there was no significant group difference for level of regard. The study displayed a low observed power across all of the index variables, suggesting that a larger sample size could have increased the chances of group differences being detected.

**Table 2***Tests of Between-Subjects Effects (N=128)*

| Scale                    | Control<br>M<br>(n=41) | Imagine-<br>other M<br>(n=41) | Objective<br>M (n=46) | F   | Sig. | Partial Eta<br>Square | Observed<br>Power |
|--------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|-----|------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Positive<br>Attributions | 3.28                   | 3.28                          | 3.36                  | .12 | .89  | .00                   | .07               |
| Level of Regard          | 4.68                   | 4.48                          | 4.63                  | .54 | .58  | .01                   | .14               |
| Empathic<br>Concern      | 3.63                   | 3.76                          | 3.68                  | .40 | .67  | .01                   | .11               |
| Perspective-<br>Taking   | 3.56                   | 3.72                          | 3.62                  | .75 | .47  | .01                   | .18               |
| Unconditionality         | 3.75                   | 3.57                          | 3.70                  | .73 | .48  | .01                   | .17               |

\*P &lt; .10 \*\*P &lt; .05

## Discussion

The current study attempted to broaden the scope of the literature by beginning to understand how the construct of empathy between work colleagues can be measured and possibly manipulated. A methodology established by Batson and colleagues (1988), and iterated upon in multiple studies was chosen to investigate this (Todd, Bodenhausen, & Galinsky, 2012). An exploratory approach was assumed due to the lack of relevant literature specific to empathy manipulation in the workplace (Kamas & Preston, 2020).

### Perspective-Taking

There was insufficient evidence to support Hypothesis 1, which tested whether the imagine-other empathy primed group would score higher on perspective-taking than the control, who would in turn score higher than the objective primed group. There are a number of reasons why support for this hypothesis may not have been found. Although the current study used a less

dramatic adaption of the Katie Banks scenario, there is evidence to suggest that this still should have been sufficient to instigate a priming effect. Batson and colleagues (1988) successfully adapted the Katie Banks scenario themselves when attempting to prime individuals to perspective-take with a homeless man. The severity of the man's plight was similar to that of the women depicted in the current study; they were experiencing high levels of stress and sorrow, but not the same extent as a women who had recently lost her parents in an automobile accident. Similarly, Finlay and Stephan (2000) had participants read a paragraph written from the perspective of an African-American college student experiencing racism from their peers. The priming information in this study was similar to that of the current study, however both this and the vignette were delivered visually, providing further evidence that relatively simple methods of priming perspective-taking are effective.

While these similar studies suggest that a variety of priming methods can be employed, it is important to note that they were conducted in an experimental setting. The current study was conducted online, which may have had an impact on the effectiveness of the prime itself (Vinski & Watter, 2012). A similar methodology was utilised by Howard and colleagues (2017), who attempted to prime individuals to display higher levels of honesty when making price attributions. They implemented an identical priming procedure in both an experimental and online setting, finding that the participants who received the prime online showed no significant change in honesty while those who met face-to-face did. This phenomenon reflects the concept that participants' cognitive engagement with the priming mechanism is a key determinant of its effectiveness (Todd & Burgmer, 2013). Perspective-taking is a relatively cerebral process, requiring an individual to consciously process and reframe information (Davis, 1983). Therefore, it is possible that the online delivery of the prime did not create enough emotional salience for

participants to fully engage with the perspective-taking process. This is shown in group invariance between priming conditions as participants recall their baseline willingness to perspective-take without being influenced by the prime as intended (Zaki & Cikara, 2015).

Similarly, experimental perspective-taking studies predominantly use students as their sample, raising an issue with external validity. There is no existing data on whether a methodology similar to Batson, Early, and Salvarani's (1997) Katie Banks scenario is effective in specifically priming full-time workers. With the average age of participants being forty in the present study, the demographic of the current study's targeted population is dissimilar to university students. This is supported by Wieck and Kunzmann's (2015) study, showing that older individuals score lower on perspective-taking than their young counterparts. Although there was no significant effect of age in the current study, there were no participants under the age of twenty. Wieck and Kunzmann (2015) found that adolescents aged sixteen to twenty displayed significantly higher perspective-taking and lower empathic concern than older age groups. The average age of participants in Batson, Early, and Salvarani's (1997) study was twenty one. It is possible that the influence of age on the effectiveness of the prime in the current study was not captured simply due to a lack of young participants.

### **Empathic Concern**

Hypothesis 2 stated that the imagine-other empathy primed condition would score higher on empathic concern than the control, who would in turn score higher than the objectively primed group. There was insufficient support for this hypothesis. As discussed, there is little prior research that investigates whether empathic concern is susceptible to temporary manipulation (Mikulincer et al, 2001). Empathic concern is a measure of affective empathy, which is commonly referred to as trait empathy (Davis, 1983). There have been divergent

findings as to whether short term fluctuations in empathic concern occur at all. For example, Batson, Early, and Salvarani (1997) found that feelings of empathic concern increased along with perspective-taking under priming manipulation. In contrast, Davis (1983) denotes that as a measure of affective empathy, empathic concern should be relatively stable across time. Notably, perspective-taking priming studies tend to use an adaption of Davis' (1980) empathic concern scale (Batson et al, 1989) (Todd & Burgmer, 2014). The original questionnaire, as included in the current study, uses historical language when asking for participants' responses, while the adapted versions ask participants how they are feeling in the present moment. For example, the original item "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me" was included in the current study, whilst Batson, Early, and Salvarani (1997) had participants rate how concerned, tender, and compassionate they were currently feeling.

Empathic concern was the only empathy scale that was not altered at all for the purposes of this study. This was a deliberate attempt to maintain the content validity of this scale (Davis, 1983). If empathic concern had increased in the empathy primed group as hypothesised, while the adapted scales had not, it would suggest that the validity of the changed scales had been compromised. However, because no significant difference in empathic concern was produced, it is possible that the scales were valid and the priming procedure was ineffective.

Although this is further complicated by the aforementioned conflicting findings in the literature as to whether affective empathy is in fact susceptible to priming. While the current study hypothesised that the prime would affect empathic concern, the finding of null difference is concurrent with some studies (Davis, 1983). Therefore, though this seems to point to an issue in the priming procedure, this is not definitive.



### **Positive Attributions**

Hypothesis 3 stated that the empathy primed group would score higher on the positive attributions scale than the control, who would score higher than the objective primed group. This was also not supported. This scale was slightly adapted from Parker and Axtell's (2001) measure of attributional thought between employees and their teams. They found that positive attributions were significantly positively correlated with generalised perspective-taking, suggesting a chronological process where perspective-taking allows for a more positive evaluation of team performance. As explained by Galper (1976), taking the perspective of another person allows people to take more account of external factors which causes them to be less vindictive when failure occurs and more positive when there is success.

Similarly Todd, Bodenhausen, and Galinsky (2012) found that a perspective-taking manipulation led to participants taking more account of context when evaluating the behaviours of racial minorities. Given that the imagine-other empathy primed group was expected to display higher levels of perspective-taking, they would be more willing to account for environmental factors when thinking about the performance of their colleagues. Thus, they would express the thoughts and behaviours of their colleagues were less important to their relationship than would the control and objective prime. This would be shown by the imagine-other empathy condition displaying higher levels of unconditionality and positive attributions. Given that the prime did not lead to a significant difference between groups in perspective-taking, this relationship is difficult to measure given the current data-set. This is because it was hypothesised that unconditionality and positive attributions would increase as a result of perspective-taking being successfully primed. An alternative explanation could be that peoples' calculation of the importance of their colleagues' actions is not susceptible to immediate change. Essentially,

participants in the imagine-other condition may have felt empathetic towards the individual in the audio vignette, but were unwilling to transfer this empathy to their own colleagues. As a result, they did not re-evaluate the role of external factors in the performance of their workmates as was hypothesised.

### **Unconditionality**

There was also not sufficient support for hypothesis 4, that the empathy group would score higher than the control and objective groups in unconditionality. As with empathic concern, it was difficult to predict the direction of this effect based on existing literature. The unconditionality items themselves share similarities with the construct of attributional thoughts, as they incorporate aspects of how people's behaviour determines others' opinions of them (Regan & Totten, 1975). The primary difference is that attributional thought specifically mentions contextual factors, whilst the unconditionality scale does not account for this (Barrett-Lennard, 2015). As an example, the positive attributions item: "If my colleagues make mistakes, it's usually not their fault" insinuates external factors must be the cause of mistakes. In contrast, the unconditionality item: "My liking or disliking of my colleagues isn't changed by anything they say about themselves" has a similar context, but does not reference external factors. There was a moderate positive correlation between unconditionality and the positive attributions measure in the current study, suggesting that the inclusion of context in the latter diversifies these constructs (Malle, 2006).

The internal reliability of the unconditionality scale in the current study was very low. A factor analysis of the items revealed that the removal of any one item would not significantly improve the measure, meaning that the data from the scale is not reliable and possibly invalid (Billings et al, 2007). There is no published evidence of unconditionality being measured in a

perspective-taking priming study, most likely because the original scale was developed for a clinical setting (Barrett-Lennard, 2015). The adaptation of unconditionality and level of regard scales for the purposes of this study were an exploratory measure to determine if these items were transferable between a clinical and work setting. Level of regard showed a high internal reliability coefficient, suggesting that the unconditionality scale in particular did not adapt well to an organisational setting. Upon reviewing the items, the scale seems to be capturing a few different constructs. For example, item one: “My interest in my colleagues depends on their performance” is outcome related and not necessarily related to a personal relationship. While item three: “I would prefer if some of my colleagues were a different or particular kind of person” (reverse scored) does not mention performance and queries one’s willingness to change their colleagues. This measure was only minimally adjusted as the original scale was validated in a clinical setting (Barrett-Lennard, 2015). Also, unconditionality was included because of its aforementioned similarity to the construct of attributional thought. The positive attributions scale developed by Parker and Axtell (2001) has not been validated in previous research, so unconditionality was intended to provide convergent validity with that measure.

### **Level of Regard**

An exploratory research question queried whether there would be a difference between groups on the level of regard scale. Results show no significant group difference, suggesting that employees’ evaluation of their colleagues is not influenced by a perspective-taking manipulation. However, this is difficult to extricate to the population because of the study’s low statistical power. It was proposed that the level of regard that participants had for their colleagues would not be susceptible to the priming effect because this is a stable evaluation (Ponjuan, Conley, & Trower, 2011). Almost and colleagues (2010) measured the interpersonal relationships between

healthcare professionals operating in a team, finding that individuals' regard for their colleagues as people was strongly correlated with organisational morale and influenced the degree to which they were willing to perspective-take with one another. The current study found that on average, all conditions expressed a high level of regard for their colleagues. This may have also influenced how willing participants were to perspective-take, as the generally high level of regard in the control and objective conditions may have offset some of the difference in the observed measure of perspective-taking.

### **Demographic Variables**

It was also questioned whether there would be a significant correlation between empathic concern and age and between perspective-taking and age. Based on existing research, it was expected that empathic concern would increase with age, while perspective-taking decreased (Khanjani et al, 2015). Results show non-significant correlations in the predicted directions, which may suggest that a higher-powered study would have produced the predicted relationships. A similar question queried whether women would display more empathic concern and higher perspective-taking than men. There was no significant correlation between perspective-taking and gender. However, the results do show a significant correlation, with women tending to display higher empathic concern than men. This was also found by Davis (1980) during the creation of his empathic concern scale. As such, there is evidence for convergent validity, that Davis' (1980) empathic concern items are applicable to a workplace setting.

An exploratory question asked whether participants working in the Public Sector would score higher on perspective-taking and empathic concern than those in the Private Sector (Kamas & Preston, 2020). There was no significant correlation between these variables. There is

evidence for confounding effects between these variables in the literature (Klimecki et al, 2016). While intuitively it seems that those higher in empathy would be more willing to sacrifice financial reward for the chance to work in an altruistic field, there is evidence that altruistic motivation can be fulfilled within highly competitive Private Sector work (Sessa, 1996). This is because altruism can be expressed through citizenship and helping behaviours within Private Sector firms as well as those in the Public Sector. The primary difference is that areas of Public Sector work such as education and healthcare include an intrinsic means of expressing altruism through helping customers, while Private Sector jobs do not necessarily offer this. The current study could not reasonably measure citizenship and helping behaviours. As such, it is possible that participants working in the Private Sector who scored highly on perspective-taking and empathic concern engage in more altruistic behaviours at work, while Public Sector employees express altruistic behaviours more through the nature of their work itself (Abu Bakar et al, 2018).

## **Limitations**

### **Audio Vignette**

There are a number of limitations to the current study as a result of its exploratory nature in researching perspective-taking priming in an organisational setting. As previously mentioned, the audio recording featured in the current study was deliberately adapted from Batson, Early, and Salvarani's (1997) Katie Banks scenario to depict a less dramatic situation for participants to empathise with. The reason for this was both to reduce the possibility of participants being offended without any opportunity for a face-to-face debriefing, and to provide a situation that could be occurring in participants' own workplace without their knowledge. However, as no prior research has attempted to prime employees to specifically empathise with their colleagues, there is little information as to whether a stronger prime may have been required to have an

effect. Throughout multiple studies, Batson and colleagues (1988) showed that minimal priming was required to have a significant effect on individuals' perspective-taking. As has been mentioned, these were conducted in an experimental setting and there is little information available as to the effectiveness of perspective-taking priming in an organisational context. Therefore, it is possible that adjusting the circumstances of the Katie Banks scenario to be less dramatic may have negatively impacted the results of the current study. The decision was made to alter the audio vignette to depict an inoffensive scenario that could occur within participants' place of work. However, as an exploratory study, it may have been preferable to design a situation with similar stakes to the Katie Banks scenario in order to instigate a strong emotional response from participants (Batson, 2009).

### **Measures**

The current study drew from validated scales for the perspective-taking, empathic concern, level of regard, and unconditionality measures, however these were all adapted for the purposes of this research. There are very few validated measures of the sub-facets of empathy relating to colleagues, meaning there is the possibility that the slight changes made to these items compromised their validity and/or reliability (Chrysikou & Thompson, 2016). The reliability of each scale with the exception of unconditionality was moderate-strong, providing evidence that the reliability of the perspective-taking, positive attributions, empathic concern, and level of regard scales was retained in the context of the current study. The use of the term "colleagues" as the target of each item was carefully considered. Being a broad term, it was expected that participants might draw different conclusions as to who they considered to be a colleague to them. For example one manager might have considered both their boss and assistant as colleagues, while another only thought of their assistant in this manner. Providing guidance on

this term was considered, as it would ensure that participants interpreted the questions in the same way. However, this was not included both for the reason that it might have the reverse effect and create confusion in some participants, and that the participants would have a solid implicit idea of who their colleagues were without prompt. In the above case, the manager who considered their boss as a colleague probably did so because they spend more time interacting with them, and have a stronger relationship than the participant who did not think of their boss as a colleague. With this justification in mind, it is still possible that the validated scales were jeopardised by adapting them to this setting.

Similar to the above points, it is difficult to determine the validity of the current study's results because a pre-primed baseline level of each empathy scale was not captured (Davis, 1983). This was another practical consideration that was made, with the concern being that participants were already difficult to recruit for a one-off measurement as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. Due to budgetary limitations it was also not affordable to gather baseline measures from the participants recruited by the external market research company. This would have enabled within-group comparisons, providing a clearer picture on the effect that each prime condition was having. Consequently, the current study relies on the assumption that there is no variance between the groups at the baseline level. This was strengthened by randomly assigning participants to each condition. Other similar studies have also made this assumption with random group assignment and a comparable sample size, providing support for this methodology (Batson et al, 1988) (Todd, Bodenhausen, and Galinsky, 2012).

### **Future Research**

Future research should first develop a thorough understanding of empathy within an organisational context before attempting to manipulate it. There are very few validated scales

that measure empathy within a work setting and the majority of research, such as the current study, adapts existing general scales of empathy to fit the work context (Parker & Axtell, 2001). As was previously discussed, it is vital for a coherent and robust operationalisation of empathy to be developed across various settings in order for researchers to ensure they are studying the same construct (Davis, 1980). Forming an increased understanding of how empathy is expressed in a work setting would enable comparative research to be conducted between settings. For example, the development of a work-specific empathy scale would allow researchers to investigate differences in how individuals express empathy with their colleagues as opposed to their friends and family. This would build a framework of knowledge for future research to continue to develop.

Another avenue of research is to determine ways in which the level of perspective-taking between employees can be altered. The current study attempted a short-term manipulation through priming in order to test whether Batson, Early, and Salvarani's (1997) general methodology would apply in a work setting. While no significant effects were found in this study, this provides evidence that a stronger prime may be necessary to produce fluctuations in this population. A study could more closely mimic the Katie Banks scenario, displaying an individual in extremely dire circumstances who should evoke a stronger emotive response. As found by Batson and colleagues (1988), this could serve to create more divergence between priming conditions, resulting in clearer results. Having a stronger priming scenario would provide further evidence as to whether employees are less willing to change their level of perspective-taking with their colleagues than in general if no significant results were generated.

A simple way of altering the current study would be to use the audio vignette as the priming mechanism itself rather than including a statement telling participants to think



empathetically or objectively. Klimecki and colleagues (2016) used a method similar to this in priming participants to behave altruistically. The empathy-primed group saw a recording of an orphaned child in need, while the control group were shown neutral conditions of different scenery and mundane activities. This method uses the recording as the prime and does not require any instruction. Therefore, removing the instructions altogether and only having the empathy group listen to the audio vignette would induce a stronger priming effect, allowing for a clearer insight as to whether full-time workers are susceptible to this method of perspective-taking priming.

Alternatively, research could take a longitudinal approach to manipulating perspective-taking. Based on Sessa's (1996) suggestion that empathy can be trained with repeated use, a within-organisation study could be conducted where certain individuals are given daily or weekly reminders to empathise with their colleagues. A short verbal reminder could be provided, perhaps with an example of personal problems that could be happening with colleagues. Then the perspective-taking, empathic concern, and positive attributions of all employees could be measured across time. Evidence that repeated, simple reminders to perspective-taking with colleagues are effective would be provided if the level of the empathy group increased over time.

## **Conclusion**

While the current study was not able to confirm any of the proposed hypotheses, it does provide relevant information as to how the understanding of workplace empathy can be further developed. Firstly, a validated scale of the sub-facets of empathy specifically targeted towards colleagues is a necessary starting point for future studies to draw from a reliable framework. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that encouraging people to perspective-take with a distressed individual does not result in a general shift in their empathy towards colleagues. With

many studies cataloguing the plethora of organisational benefits that can be reaped from fostering an empathetic workforce, it should be of great interest to employers and academics alike to determine effective strategies of increasing this construct. Similarly, developing a thorough understanding of how the various sub-facets of empathy are manifested in an organisational setting will allow for more in-depth research to be conducted, which will in turn result in more meaningful and practical findings.

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**Appendix A: Audio Vignette Script**

“Work is going okay, I am working with a team at the moment on a project for a client which is going, alright. Well, it started off okay but actually the past couple weeks working on it hasn’t been going that well. The project is actually overdue now, and I know this is because my colleagues have been trying to cover for me. I haven’t told anyone about this, but I am feeling very overwhelmed and weighed down by things happening outside of work.

My partner has been very sick for the past month, we’re not really sure what’s wrong with him and the doctors haven’t been able to give us many answers. He’s been in and out of hospital for weeks now, we have been making regular trips to after hours and I can’t sleep at night because of the worry.

When I am at work I can’t focus, I just feel this constant stress and anxiety. I try to hide it from my team because I know it shouldn’t impact my work, but it really does.

I am worried that people will think less of me for showing this weakness, that my boss and colleagues will think I am a burden on the team. I want to be better, I don’t want to sit here and make excuses for failing other people, but I feel like I can’t focus on work with everything going on around me.”

## **Appendix B: Questionnaire Items**

### **Demographic Variables**

1. What is your age?
2. Are you currently in full-time employment in New Zealand?
3. What gender do you most identify with?
4. What is your level in your organisation?
5. For how many years have you occupied your current position?
6. What industry do you work in?
7. Do you work in the Public or Private sector?

### **Workplace Perspective-taking scale adapted from Davis (1980)**

Scoring: 0 (Does not describe me well), 1, 2, 3, 4 (Describes me very well)

1. I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.
2. When I'm upset at a colleague, I usually try to "put myself in their shoes" for a while.
3. I try to look at my colleagues' sides of a disagreement before I make a decision.
4. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from my colleagues' point of view. (Reversed)
5. Before criticizing a colleague, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.
6. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to my colleagues' arguments. (Reversed)
7. I sometimes try to understand my colleagues better by imagining how things look from their perspective.

### **Davis (1980) Empathic Concern Items**

Scoring: 0 (Does not describe me well), 1, 2, 3, 4 (Describes me very well)

1. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen.

2. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.
3. Sometimes I don't feel sorry for other people when they are having problems. (Reversed)
4. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them. (Reversed)
5. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective toward them.
6. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.

**Positive Attributions adapted from Parker and Axtell (2001)**

Scoring: 1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Somewhat Disagree, 3. Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 4. Somewhat Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

1. My colleagues are doing the best they can, given the circumstances.
2. If my colleagues make mistakes, it's usually not their fault.
3. My colleagues work just as hard as I do.

**Level of Regard adapted from Barrett-Lennard (2015)**

Scoring: 1. No, I strongly feel that it is not true, 2. No, I feel it is not true, 3. No, I feel it is probably untrue, 4. Yes I feel that it is probably true, 5. Yes I feel it is true, 6. Yes, I strongly feel that it is true.

1. I respect my colleagues as people.
2. I feel friendly and warm towards my colleagues.
3. I find my colleagues rather dull and uninteresting. (Reversed)
4. I really don't like my colleagues. (Reversed)

**Unconditionality adapted from Barrett-Lennard (2015)**

Scoring: 1. No, I strongly feel that it is not true, 2. No, I feel it is not true, 3. No, I feel it is probably untrue, 4. Yes I feel that it is probably true, 5. Yes I feel it is true, 6. Yes, I strongly feel that it is true.

1. My interest in my colleagues depends on their performance. (Reversed)
2. My liking or disliking of my colleagues isn't changed by anything they say about themselves.
3. I would prefer if some of my colleagues were a different or particular kind of person. (Reversed).
4. Whether my colleagues are expressing "good" thoughts or "bad" feelings or desires makes no difference to my attitude toward them.

### **Believability (Prime Detection)**

Scoring: 0 (Very unbelievable), 1 (Somewhat unbelievable), 2 (Somewhat believable), 3 (Very believable)

1. To what extent is this a situation that you believe could happen in your workplace?

### **Appendix C: Debriefing Information**

Thank you for completing the survey. The true purpose of this study was to determine whether reading a short sentence before listening to the audio recording would change participants' answers to the prior questions. The recording was produced as part of this study, so the situation was fictional and did not occur in a real workplace. As a participant, you were randomly assigned to one of three groups, with each group hearing a different message before the interview began to play. The three conditions were as follows:

You are about to listen to an audio recording taken from an interview with a young woman. This person was asked to describe how the past few weeks of work have been for her.  
(Group 1)

You are about to listen to an audio recording taken from an interview with a young woman. This person was asked to describe how the past few weeks of work have been for her. While listening to this recording, do your best to imagine how the person being interviewed must be feeling about what has happened and how their life is being affected. (Group 2)

You are about to listen to an audio recording taken from an interview with a young woman. This person was asked to describe how the past few weeks of work have been for her. While listening to this recording, do your best to remain as objective as possible about what has happened to the person being interviewed and how their life is being affected. (Group 3)

This is called a "priming" procedure, where our brains may subconsciously process information differently depending on subtle cues. The purpose of including this prime was to determine whether encouraging some participants to be more empathetic towards the individual in the audio recording would cause them to also have more positive thoughts about their own colleagues.



Unfortunately, this information could not be revealed earlier as it would likely change the way you responded to the survey. Knowing this, if you would like to withdraw from participation you may close the page and your results will not be recorded.